

—PREACHER MIKE AND THE BLACK CROSS REVELATION

by Kevin L. Donihe

Charlie Jackson sat in the back row of pews, staring at the huge black cross hanging above the pulpit. It wavered, hitched, and emitted a nearly inaudible hum, but Charlie chalked that up to the high-grade acid swirling in his brain.

He realized he was feeling the effects of LSD within fifteen minutes of taking communion. Charlie had experimented extensively prior to being saved back in '97, and one taste was all he needed to remember the initial semi-charged feeling for life. By a quarter after twelve, the buzz was undeniable, and, strangely enough, somewhat pleasant. He just wasn't expecting to feel that particular sensation again, especially not during church.

Perhaps one of the teenaged parishioners had laced the wine as a joke. Perhaps Preacher Mike had done it himself. He'd been acting a bit flaky as of late, though no one but Charlie seemed to notice or care. Last Sunday, in the middle of discussing the Parable of the Good Shepherd, Preacher Mike had babbled about "the divine spark within" in relation to a mercifully ambiguous "cup of overflowing seed". The week before, he had taught Sunday School while wearing a crown of thorns. At the time, Charlie pretended not to notice the blood seeping from his lacerated forehead.

Whether Preacher Mike or someone else was the guilty party, he didn't know. All Charlie knew was that things had gotten quite a bit stranger in the last eight hours. He barely remembered the events of the afternoon; a cartoonish haze surrounded everything. One memory: people holding pointy objects over some guy-- Charlie thought it might have been Old Man Caruthers--as he lay prone on the floor. Another: random babbling and gesticulating followed by a marathon session of rattler handling. The presence of the snakes was itself odd. Though charismatic, *New Light Fellowship* wasn't the kind of church that took up and danced with serpents. Charlie questioned where the snakes had come from--perhaps the woods behind the parking lot--then wondered if he had aided in their capture.

Most clearly of all, he remembered Preacher Mike standing above the congregation as his flock sat in circle on the floor. He waved his arms and produced humming and clicking sounds with his throat. This continued for almost an hour until he made his first coherent proclamation: *Preacher Mike is, from this day forward, God's one and only messenger.* Charlie thought he saw blue electric bolts shoot from the

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man's fingertips as he spoke, but that had to be a hallucination. Preacher Mike then broke the circle, approached the black cross, and held an animated, fifteen-minute conversation with it.

Dread crept into Charlie as he watched. Hazy memories of abandon clashed with his returning rational mind. His skin felt hot, sticky, and tight. His heart pounded, and, for a moment, he feared he might suffer a heart attack even though he was only twenty-eight. Charlie was prepared to start flailing, until he noticed others acting on similar impulses. One woman ran to Preacher Mike, jumped on his back, and branded him the Antichrist. Another tried to rid Preacher Mike of a demon by invoking Jesus' name. Other slightly more composed people darted their heads back and forth, asking unanswerable questions in shrill, panicky voices.

The people closest to Preacher Mike--those who had bellowed "Amen" and "Praise the Lord" as the man clicked and mumbled-- seized the offending parishioners. They dragged them, kicking and screaming, to the basement. There they remained forty minutes later. On occasions, Charlie heard them pounding the floorboards beneath him. He wondered when, if ever, they would be released.

Preacher Mike ordered the remaining parishioners outside after the last person had been thrown into the cellar. Charlie lined up with the rest of them, though he made sure to linger at the back of the line. He looked suspicious, but he wasn't about to go out. What if Preacher Mike planned to shove a special batch of Kool-Aid down everyone's throat? Charlie returned to the pews once the last follower had crossed the threshold. He sat there until forced to hide as Preacher Mike reentered the sanctuary on route to his office.

Charlie didn't reclaim his seat until the sound of the man's clicking heels faded from earshot, and he had remained there ever since, rocking back and forth. He didn't want to get up or look out the window and see what the other parishioners were doing. Nor did he wish to confront Preacher Mike until he felt a little less tripped out. He was afraid he would babble or say the wrong thing and wind up in the basement, too.

Charlie looked at the clock. Based on the way he felt, he decided to wait a few more minutes before trying his luck.

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Fifteen minutes later, he arose on unsteady legs. The floor bubbled beneath his feet, but he ignored the sensation as much as possible. Though he didn't feel straight enough to confront Preacher Mike, he could no longer stomach the wait.

Halfway to the hall, Charlie turned his head and caught sight of one of the stained-glass windows. The glass looked fluid. Individual colors meshed with other shades, producing hues the likes of which he had never seen. It felt as though his consciousness was transferring itself into that strangely mobile glass. He only pulled himself away when he realized he had been standing, lost in the moment, for minutes.

Charlie shook his head to clear his mind. Then he left the sanctuary and entered the hallway. Preacher Mike's office door stood ajar at the end of the white, starkly lit corridor. He listened for odd sounds. Though he heard nothing, he knew Preacher